

# The real *Euthyphro* Problem, solved

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Let us suppose that God commands all and only those actions that are obligatory, and prohibits all and only those actions that are wrong. We then face questions. Does God command the obligatory because it is obligatory? If so, then why pay attention to God's commands? Why not look rather to the real source of obligatoriness? Or is it instead that the obligatory is obligatory because commanded by God? If so, then would something else have been obligatory if God had commanded otherwise? And why bother with putative obligations created and variable at whim? Or again, are wrong actions wrong because God prohibits them, or does God prohibit them because they are wrong? Whether God prohibits things for some reason or for no reason, either way, how can his prohibition have, in itself, any weight at all? Such questions are often named 'the Euthyphro Problem', or even 'the Euthyphro Dilemma'.<sup>1</sup>

Such names are mistaken on two counts. In the first place, questions like 'Is the obligatory obligatory because God commands it, or does God command the obligatory because it is obligatory?' are scarcely taxing enough to be called problems or dilemmas. There are, it is true, dainty questions about how commands,

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples are:

R. G. Swinburne, 'Duty and the Will of God', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Dec., 1974), pp. 213-227, at p. 213 with footnote 2: 'For a theist, a man's duty is to conform to the announced will of God. Yet a theist who makes this claim about duty is faced with a traditional dilemma first stated in Plato's *Euthyphro* [Footnote: *Euthyphro* 9e]—are actions which are obligatory, obligatory because God makes them so (e.g. by commanding men to do them), or does God urge us to do them because they are obligatory anyway?'

Michael Levin, 'Understanding the Euthyphro Problem', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Apr., 1989), pp. 83-97, at p. 83 with footnote 1: 'But why is God's handiwork good, and obedience to his commands obligatory? Only two answers seem possible. Either what God wills is right because he wills it, or God wills what he wills because it is right. The rightness of what God wills is a consequence of his willing it, or his willing it is a consequence of its rightness. [Footnote: I follow standard philosophical usage in calling this the Euthyphro problem.]'

Murray Macbeath, 'The Euthyphro Dilemma', *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 91, No. 364 (Oct., 1982), pp. 565-571, at p. 565: 'Either right actions are right because God commands their performance, or God commands the performance of right actions because they are right.'

Geoff Sayre-McCord, 'Metaethics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/metaethics/>, accessed 30 April 2014: 'Whatever problems one might have making sense of eternal transcendent standards re-emerge when trying to make sense of an eternal transcendent being who might issue commands. And, as Plato emphasized in *Euthyphro*, one is also left with the difficulty of explaining why God's commands are authoritative.'

prohibitions, and permissions can alter our obligations.<sup>2</sup> It is entirely evident how I make it wrong for you to send your children to play in a field if I plant mines there, or how I stop it being wrong by removing the mines: it is wrong to send your children to play where they risk being blown apart, and what I do with the mines makes a difference to the risk. Things are oddly different if I own the field (if it is a field of mine, not a mine field), and thereby can say with authority that you may or may not send your children to play there. My words, oddly enough, can change your obligations, but not because they change the risk. For how could mere symbols change risks? You might object that my words change the risk that, if your children play in my field, they will be trespassing. If you do, then I reply that this is an odd sort of risk to take into account. Indeed, that we should be worried by the risk of trespass is exactly the same oddity as there is in the power of mere words to change obligations.

Still, the fact is that obligations can be changed by merely symbolic acts, like words and gestures, as well as by acts that make a concrete difference, like planting or removing mines. Think of how betting you £5 that Cambridge will win the Boat Race creates an obligation for me to pay you £5 when Cambridge lose. When the time comes for me to pay up, I can hardly argue: 'This alleged obligation of mine to pay you £5: do you say that I am under this obligation because I bet you? If so, then you will have to accept that my obligations would be different if my bets had been different; and then you will have to explain why we should take seriously obligations that can be varied at whim. Or do you say instead that I bet you because I am under this obligation? If so, then you must tell me what this obligation is based on, other than the bet. Either way, the bet is irrelevant.'

Because symbolic acts can change obligations, a command too can give us reason to do the thing commanded independently of its own merits. Think of soldiers whose commanding officer orders them to advance. The advance might be militarily astute; and the order might even be evidence of its military astuteness. But the order is more than just evidence that the advance is militarily astute. It adds a special reason of its own for advancing. Indeed, the order can provide a reason for advancing even if, in advance of and independent of the order, there was no military reason for those soldiers to advance. This is why a soldier charged with disobeying the order to advance cannot defend himself by pointing out, for example, 'But there was no good military reason for it to be my unit that advanced while the other unit remained in reserve'—however true that may be.

People who might be prepared to accept that bets can change obligations sometimes refuse to accept that the same can be so of commands. Their concern is with autonomy.<sup>3</sup> We are autonomous beings, they say; as such, we can perhaps bind ourselves, but can never be bound by others. There are in consequence strict limits to the sorts of authority that we can rightly acknowledge. We can rightly defer to the authority of experts: thus, if your doctor prescribes medicine, then the prescription is a good sign that you need the medicine prescribed; as an autonomous being, you can therefore decide to take the medicine that you need;

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<sup>2</sup> There are beautiful treatments of these questions by David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Book III Of Morals* (London 1740), Part II 'Of justice and injustice', and *Essays Moral, Political and Literary Part II* (London 1742), Essay 12 'Of the Original Contract.'

<sup>3</sup> Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York 1970), is a classic defence of autonomy.

but if you take it autonomously, you take it because you need it, not because you imagine that the doctor's—or anyone else's—mere say-so can itself constitute a reason for you to act. The nearest that another's say-so can come to being itself a reason for you to act is when you have autonomously bound yourself to treat it as a reason. Thus, in particular, if the Queen has any authority over us, and we are bound to obey her laws and keep her peace, then that can only be because we are parties to a social contract, in which we have autonomously agreed to give the Queen such authority.

Or so they say. And, at least to those of us who have not grown out of adolescent rebellion, it all sounds very high-minded. In my low-minded way, I consider its implications for rape. It implies that if a woman says No, that can in itself have weight with others only if they have autonomously agreed to let it have weight with them; otherwise, it can matter only as a sign that there is something independent of her saying No to make sexual intercourse with her wrong. She might, for instance, be an expert on matters of sex, and delivering her expert advice, as a doctor might give you expert advice on matters of medicine. Or perhaps her No threatens trouble, in the way that a dog's growl might warn you not to pat. But that is all the force her No can have, if commands and prohibitions cannot of themselves make obligations.

The names 'the Euthyphro Problem' and 'the Euthyphro Dilemma' are mistaken on a second count. Our questions about divine commands have little to do with the dilemma that Socrates presses upon Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue the *Euthyphro*. Socrates' dilemma takes its start, not from any supposed equivalence between being obligatory and being commanded by God, but rather from the very different supposition that all the gods love all and only what is pious and hate all and only what is impious. For the dilemma is 'Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved?' (10a2-3).<sup>4</sup> Of course, if there is only one god, then the difference between God in the singular with a capital G and all the gods in the plural dwindles to nothing. But that still leaves a world of difference between the impious and the wrong: for the existence of the one God would hardly abolish the unjust, the impolite, the cowardly, the unchaste, and all the myriad other ways apart from the impious of being wrong. Moreover, even if there is only one God, there is still a world of difference between loving and commanding. For one thing, loving is a mental attitude, while commanding is a linguistic act, and a mental attitude is not a linguistic act. This is why the verb 'to like' has come to be ambiguous, now that the Facebook generation use it both for finding something congenial and for clicking the Thumbs Up icon. For another thing, you can love things that you cannot command. I love it when people are amused by my jokes. But I don't command people to be amused. Indeed, amusement can hardly be commanded, except as a joke, even by a sovereign legislator.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Philip L. Quinn 'The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50, Supplement (Autumn, 1990) pp. 345-365, at p. 345: 'Plato's Socrates famously asks "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?"' But 'holy' is not the best rendering for the word that Plato's Socrates uses here: ὅσιος. For 'holy' is primarily a word for a quality of the divine, while ὅσιον is primarily a word for a quality that we have when take the proper attitude to the holy. The Greek word best rendered by 'holy' is ἅγιος.

One horn of the dilemma is straightforward enough. Euthyphro agrees without argument that the pious is loved by the gods for no other reason than that it is pious (10d1-5). And in this, Euthyphro is surely right. As we will be reminded later in the dialogue (14e10-15a5), gods don't need anything from us. If they like sacrifices, that is not because they rely on sacrifices for nutrition. If they find an offering of food endearing, then this is in the way that I find it endearing when my cat brings me dead mice. To one who enjoys the nectar and ambrosia of High Table, a gift of dead mice can have no charm other than the devotion that it shows. Likewise, there is nothing for a god to love in a pious sacrifice apart from the fact that it is pious.

Less straightforward is the other horn of the dilemma. Socrates has to give some argument before Euthyphro agrees also that the pious is pious because the gods love it. Let us review this argument.

The first step of the argument is that, as Euthyphro himself has recently affirmed, the pious may be defined as the godloved (τὸ θεοφιλέξ) or as what is beloved by the gods (τὸ ὑπὸ θεῶν φιλούμενον). Nothing is made to rest on the difference between these two labels. They are taken as alternative expressions of the same definition, two interchangeable labels for some one thing in common to all that is pious, some one thing which makes all that is pious be pious.

The second step of the argument is to draw a dainty distinction. I will render the distinction in English as the distinction between being in a loved condition, and being the object of an act of loving. Being in a loved condition is expressed in Greek by a passive participle combined with a copula: the indicative φιλούμενόν ἐστίν, and its infinitive φιλούμενον εἶναι. Being the object of an act of loving is expressed in Greek by the less prolix indicative φιλεῖται, and its infinitive φιλεῖσθαι. Let me say a few words about these Greek phrases and my renderings of them.

My renderings are certainly not literal. A literal rendering might turn the first into 'It is being loved' (rather than my 'It is in a loved condition') and the second into the less prolix 'It is loved' (rather than my 'It is the object of an act of loving'). But the literal rendering would be wrong. English idiom uses the difference between the longer 'It is being loved' and the shorter 'It is loved' to express a difference of aspect: the difference between 'The process of getting the thing loved is currently in hand but not yet completed' and 'In a general sort of way people succeed in loving the thing.' But such a difference of aspect is not the point of the difference between the two Greek phrases. For it is evident that the two Greek phrases are presumed to apply to exactly the same things—which is simply not so of their literal English renderings.

Moreover, my renderings are not suggested by any regular difference in nuance detectable from Greek usage elsewhere. The nearest thing to a parallel passage is the comment in Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1017a27-30 that there is no difference in the active voice between constructions with participles and copulas (ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνων ἐστίν, ἄνθρωπος βαδίζων ἐστίν, ἄνθρωπος τέμνων ἐστίν) and constructions with a plain indicative (ἄνθρωπος ὑγιαίνει, ἄνθρωπος βαδίζει, ἄνθρωπος τέμνει). Of course, philosophers sometimes misreport their mother tongue; and of course, what applies to the active voice might not apply also to the passive. Still, the obvious conclusion to draw from Aristotle's comment is that Plato is eliciting from φιλούμενόν ἐστίν and φιλεῖται contrasted meanings that they do not automatically and immediately convey. And this conclusion is perhaps confirmed by the very elaboration of the passage in which, at 10a5-c13, Socrates attempts to bring home the contrast.

If neither a literal nor an idiomatic translation requires my renderings, why then do I propose them? The reason is simply that with these renderings, it is easy to see why Euthyphro responds as he does; for it does seem pretty obvious that if something is in a loved condition, then that is because it is the object of an act of loving, rather than the other way round.

There is perhaps some argument against this obvious response. We can love people, that is, we can have people be the objects of our acts of loving, without producing any effects at all in those people. We do not affect Socrates by loving him; indeed, given his dates and ours, we could not affect him in any way without indulging in time-travel or backwards causation or something equally outlandish. In consequence, Socrates' loved condition is not an effect, caused by our acts of loving him. How then can Socrates be in a loved condition because he is the object of acts of loving? In reply to this argument, it should be enough to point out two things. First, 'because' does not always require a relationship of cause-and-effect: you get to be a grandparent because a child is born to a child of yours, however little you are affected by the birth. Second, the generalisation at 10c1-4 offers not only the cause-and-effect language of *πάσχειν* 'to be acted on, to be affected' (*ὅτι πάσχει πάσχον ἐστίν*), but also, as an alternative, the less definitely causal language of *γίγνεσθαι* 'to get to be' (*ὅτι γίγνεται γιγνόμενόν ἐστιν*).

We now come to the third step of the argument. In defining the pious as that which is godloved, or loved by the gods, Euthyphro has agreed that the pious is pious because it is in a rather special loved condition, the condition of loved by all gods. In accepting that a thing is in a loved condition because it is the object of acts of loving, Euthyphro has also agreed that if a thing's condition is that of loved by all gods, then it is in that condition because it is the object of acts of loving on the part of all the gods, or, less pompously, because all the gods love it. The third step is simply that if a thing is pious because it is in a condition, and it is in that condition because all the gods love it, then it is pious because all the gods love it. Once this is accepted, and it is hard to deny, we can immediately conclude that pious things are pious because the gods love them.

With this conclusion, we can now present the real dilemma of the *Euthyphro*. How can it be that pious things are pious because the gods love them, when, as we saw earlier, the gods love pious things because those things are pious? Which is it to be: pious because loved, or loved because pious? It seems that we cannot have it both ways. Water is the stuff which we drink and wash in; we drink and wash in that stuff because it is water; it is not that the stuff is water because we drink and wash in it; indeed, how could the stuff be water because we drink and wash in it, when we drink and wash in that stuff because it is water? An easy assumption is that the same goes for piety too. Once we make this assumption, we have our dilemma: we are required to choose between pious because loved and loved because pious.

Euthyphro solves his dilemma by rejecting his definition of the pious as what is godloved. I propose a different solution. Instead of rejecting the definition, we should reject the assumption that we cannot have it both ways. Natural kinds, like water, are different from social kinds, like the pious. A natural kind has what we may call a reality or an essence and what Socrates in 11a8 calls an *οὐσία*. We spell out this essence when we define the kind, as when we define water as  $H_2O$ . What belongs to a natural kind does so because it shares that essence. How something of a natural kind gets treated (any *πάθος* of it, to use the word that Socrates in 11a8 contrasts with *οὐσία*) does not belong in the thing's essence, as it is no part of the essence of water that it is the stuff we drink and wash in. With social kinds however,

there is no such difference between πάθος and οὐσία. The nearest that a social kind ever comes to having an essence is that what belongs to it gets treated in a certain way, and gets treated in that way because it belongs to that kind.<sup>5</sup>

Consider, for example, money. What is common to tobacco in Her Majesty's prisons, Bank of England notes in some other parts of her realms, cowry shells in 19th century Kano, bitcoins in the wilder parts of the world wide web? What makes them all money? Evidently, they are all money because and inasmuch as they are all readily accepted in exchange for goods and services. But why are they so accepted? Some of them have some independent worth: they might be smoked, or worn as jewellery. But to accept them because of such independent worth is not to accept them as money. And in any case, some of them have no such independent worth: you cannot smoke or wear a bitcoin. These things are all accepted in exchange for goods and services simply because they are all money: we accept them in exchange for goods and services because we expect that we will be able to exchange them yet once more, for yet other goods and services. There is a circularity here: money because accepted, and accepted because money. We can, and do, have it both ways.

Another example: the left side of the road in Japan is the proper side on which to drive; so is the right side of the road in Canada; what makes each of these the proper side on which to drive? People in Japan take the left to be the proper side; because of that, they drive on the left; because people in Japan drive on the left, that is the safe and therefore proper side on which to drive in Japan; and because the left is the proper side on which to drive in Japan, people in Japan take it to be the proper side; and so round in a circle. Likewise with driving on the right in Canada: the right is the proper side because people take it to be the proper side, and people take it to be the proper side because the proper side is what it is. And in parts of the world with no consensus on the matter, there simply is no such thing as the proper side on which to drive.

If we conceive of the pious along the lines of social kinds like these, rather than as a natural kind, we need not be intimidated by the dilemma that Socrates put to Euthyphro. We can happily maintain that the only οὐσία of the pious is a πάθος, that the pious is pious only because of an attitude that gods take to the pious, and that they take to it only because it is pious.

How would such a conception work in detail? The best model, I suggest, is the way in which people value tokens of politeness, respect, esteem and honour. 'Politeness costs nothing,' I was taught as a boy. It would be more accurate to say that politeness costs a little. It is at least an extra syllable to say 'please.' It takes even the youngest and healthiest a little effort to stand up when someone comes into the room; and if age or infirmity make it take more than a little effort, then the gesture is all the more respectful. It is courteous to take the trouble to send an email of thanks; and more courteous, because more trouble, to write a thankyou letter by hand, and send it by post. Ounce for ounce, gold costs more than silver, which in turn costs more than bronze; in keeping with that fact, medals of gold, silver and bronze are awarded for coming first, second and third. And so on. There are complications, of course. In particular, tokens of the very greatest honour are sometimes quite humdrum: for example, the Victoria Cross is made of gunmetal, yet

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<sup>5</sup> For an elaborate exploration of the ways in which, for social reality, thinking makes it so, see John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (Harmondsworth 1995) and *Making the Social World: the structure of human civilization* (Oxford 2010).

it outranks all other medals, including some of silver and gold;<sup>6</sup> or again, victors in lesser contests might win lavish quantities of olive oil, but the victors at Olympia won only garlands made from olive leaves.<sup>7</sup> In such cases, I take it, the humdrum token suggests that the honorand has transcended any ordinary scale of values. Such, then, are the costs of respect for those who bestow it. What about its benefits for those on whom it is bestowed? Well, when one of the costs is the transfer of some good, then one of the benefits is of course the receipt of such a good. But sometimes no good is transferred: for example, when you stand up until I am seated, I do not gain the comfort that you lose. And even when some good is transferred, the receipt of the good is not exactly the benefit. I have plenty of fine ties anyway, and can easily afford plenty more. So when my pupils give me a fine tie, the improvement to my wardrobe, and the savings to my pocket, are negligible. Even so, I am delighted by their gift. For such a gift is a mark of esteem. But what makes it so apt a mark of esteem is the delight that it causes: delight in the recognition that my pupils have expended thought and time and money in order to bring me delight. It is in precisely such a way that gods can like pious offerings.

This talk of marks of esteem, that please because they are intended to please, might suggest that such intentions to please are easily fulfilled. There can be easy fulfillment of some intentions to perform symbolic acts. For example, I may attempt to do something to tell you that I love you; and if you notice that I'm doing it with that intention, then my attempt succeeds.<sup>8</sup> Whether my declaration of love be welcome or unwelcome, believed or disbelieved, I have certainly succeeded in making the declaration if you notice what I am about. Nothing quite like this is true of the intention to please with a mark of esteem. For sometimes the intention to please can be there, and be noticed, and yet result in displeasure. Imagine a slacking pupil who, instead of changing his ways, tries to ingratiate himself by offering me a bottle of wine. This would displease me. And the more expensive the wine, the greater my displeasure. I am not to be bought like that. There is an obvious parallel with what the prophets tell us about the God of Israel: 'Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?' (Micah 6: 6-8; cf. Isaiah 1: 10-17, Amos 5: 21-24). That the same would be true of the gods of the Greeks is, one hopes, a safe inference, though it is drawn only in rare texts like Plato (or pseudo-Plato) *Lesser Alcibiades* 149e 'The divine is not the sort of thing that can be manipulated by gifts, like some ignoble moneylender.'

As these reflections should remind us, gods like and are pleased by, not only

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<sup>6</sup> See Medals, Awards and Insignia – British Army Website URL = <https://www.army.mod.uk/structure/32322.aspx>, accessed 30 April 2014.

<sup>7</sup> See Aristophanes *Wealth* 582-6 for prizes at the Olympic games, and Aristotle *Constitution of Athens* 60.3 and *Inscriptiones Graecae* II.ii.2311.23-70 for prizes at the Panathenaic games.

<sup>8</sup> The classic exposition of how such intentions work remains H.P. Grice, 'Meaning', published first in *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Jul., 1957), pp. 377-388, and since reprinted in his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989), pp. 213-223.

symbolic marks of esteem to themselves, but also things with other merits, such as doing justice (Homer *Odyssey* 14.83-84) and honouring one's father and mother (Euripides fr. 852 TGF). How are these other things, and the liking that gods have for them, connected with piety? My pupils please me, not only by their gifts and their thanks, but also, and more importantly, by their industrious application to their studies. They know this, and consequently, in addition to all the other motives that they have for applying themselves, they can apply themselves also in order to please me. This in turn means that I can take an additional pleasure. And thus their industrious application to their studies has an additional merit, over and above its original industry. Or again, if a pupil were to slack, I would be displeased. And if the slacking indicated that the pupil did not care about displeasing me, then that lack of care itself would add to my displeasure, and the slacking would display an additional fault, over and above laziness. In exactly the same way, I suggest, an action that the gods dislike for other reasons—for instance, because it is unjust—they can dislike also for showing them disdain. Such an action will be, not only unjust, but also impious. Or again, even if the gods like a just action because it is just, they can like it also for the further reason that it shows them esteem. When the gods like a just action for this further reason, then they like it because it is pious. And it will be pious because they have this special liking for it. We have, in short, the same circularity here, where there is more for gods to like about an action than its piety, that we first saw in actions whose piety was their only merit. Quite generally, the pious is what gods like, and gods like it because it is pious.

We may therefore draw a moral: Euthyphro was wrong to reject his definition of the pious as the godloved; for even though his definition leads to a circle, the circle to which it leads is wholly innocent. What, however, is the moral that Plato wishes us to draw? Not long after rejecting his definition, Euthyphro is brought to accept it once more (15b1-6), by an interrogation in which he seems to make not the slightest slip. Perhaps then the *Euthyphro* not only presents us with a problem quite different from that usually supposed, but also gives us a hint at the solution.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This paper has been improved by helpful remarks from Sarah Broadie, Timothy Chappell, and the participants in the Ancient Philosophy and Religion Colloquium, Cambridge, 14-16 May 2014.